

Forensics and other foreign attractions

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By Okey Ndibe

Going by the parade of political luminaries to the home of slain Lagos gubernatorial candidate, Anthony Olufunso Williams, an observer might think that the employment of violence as a political tool was the exception in Nigeria. The truth is rather gorier. Violence is the rule.

Too many Nigerian politicians detest the idea of civilly arbitrated electoral contests. If they can get their way, they want to be "selected" unopposed. If that option proves out of reach, then they seek to intimidate their opponents with words and swords. Rather than engage an opponent in a spirited debate, many a Nigerian politician would reach for a cudgel and pummel the other candidate to submission, withdrawal or death.

Williams' tragic death points up the depravity of the political terrain. It reveals how deeply woe-be-gone is the nation's politics. The late Williams' home in Dolphin Estate, Lagos, has seen a parade of the nation's political leadership, from President Olusegun Obasanjo through legislative officers to state governors. It's as if each top political figure not currently detained as a suspect in the dastardly act has made a condolence pilgrimage to the address of bereaved Williams. Each visitor has tried to out-wax the others in indignation. Each

has called on the police to get to the bottom of this one. Some have seen fit to play politics, viewing the slaying of the governorship candidate as another proof that the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) is, in Wole Soyinka's words, "a nest of killers." In comforting the deceased man's survivors, some have appealed to the inscrutable will of God. "We love him," one caller said, "but God loves him more." The president, adroit at lending colour to a somber moment, pronounced a curse on the heads of the perpetrators.

In short, we have witnessed paroxysms of outrage by politicians on a scale that has not been seen since the murder of former Attorney-General Bola Ige. What are we to make of such effusions?

What strikes me, fundamentally, is the underlying hypocrisy and hollowness of it all. Violence has been refined into the currency of discourse in Nigerian politics. Many Nigerian politicians (I dare say, most) are quicker to recruit thugs than to define the vision animating their ambitions. Their rhetoric is all-too often incendiary. Favouring martial language, they speak of conquering their opponents and capturing offices and votes. They may never have a manifesto, but they won't be caught outside without a busload of well-armed thugs.

Why, you ask, is Nigerian politics steeped in such distemper? The answer lies in the spoils system. To hold public office in Nigeria is to be possessed of plenary, unquestionable powers. It is to have the freedom to dip your hands in the public treasury without anybody to raise queries, much less sound alarms. It is to ascend to the heights of a demigod. It is to be able to compel lesser mortals to address you as Your Excellency even when you excel only in thievery, or Distinguished Senator when your only distinction is in somnolent idleness, or to be called a political chieftain when thieftain is far more apt. To hold public office in Nigeria often translates into being able to transfer the nation's funds into private bank accounts in foreign nations, or to buy swanky homes in Europe, England or North America.

The responsibility for Mr. Williams' death is borne, to a large degree, by the same tribe of politicians trooping to Dolphin Estate to mourn him. It is they, by the treacherous terms they have consecrated for political engagement, who made it possible to dispatch him. We can safely wager that those who plotted the man's death were not actuated by a desire to serve the people of Lagos state. The coldly calculated decision to subtract him from next year's field of gubernatorial aspirants must have been informed by evil and highly personal objectives.

Nigeria's ill-luck with its "leaders" is nowhere more evident than in the government's decision to invite British police officers to participate in investigating Mr. Williams' assassination.

Think about it: almost fifty years after Nigeria's attainment of independence, we still have to turn to the British to show us the way out of the labyrinths of a high profile murder case. The collective resources of the Nigerian Police are, we have admitted, incapable of conducting a forensics investigation. What manner of nation, then? Is this not a moment for profound national shame? What next? Should we abide the prescription of that late charming politician, Sam Mbakwe, who in a moment of despair had wondered aloud if Nigerians were not better off inviting the British back to run their affairs?

That sense of national shame might have been attenuated were the odds reasonable that the British imports would help solve the riddle of this blatant homicide. Sadly, the invitation of Scotland Yard may turn out a merely cosmetic, even cynical, move. Nobody should forget in a hurry that foreign experts, from the United States no less, were summoned to assist in untangling the even more shocking assassination of Bola Ige. Nothing came of it. Instead, the Ige case became a metaphor for prosecutorial futility. Despite assurances, the most vociferous from the president, that Ige's killers would be unmasked, every single suspect was able to walk, and one of them all the way to the hallowed grounds of Nigeria's Senate.

One can only imagine how cruelly unnerving it must be for members of Mr. Williams' family if their high hopes are dashed by an inept investigation. It is true that Scotland Yard evokes images of competence and forensic adeptness, but

one must not downplay the frustrating effect of the Nigerian (police) factor. As far as homicide investigations are concerned, Nigerian police officers, truth be told, are in the Dark Ages. In bringing together British and Nigerian officers to handle one case, what we get is a conflation of two unbridgeable cultures. Far more likely than achieving a break in the case is the staging of a veritable clash of cultures. Long before British cops reach the crime scene, their Nigerian counterparts are likely to have irremediably compromised the scene, rendering the crime intractable.

It is no secret that the cadre of Nigeria's law enforcement lags terribly in professional know-how. Weaned on ways of bullying Nigerians and beating bribes out of law-abiding citizens, many a Nigerian police officer doesn't have the vaguest notion of the true nature of his task. The basic impoverishment of his training is compounded by the fact that he operates in a milieu where the rich, famous and powerful are understood to be above the law. Such an officer is ill-equipped to solve homicides. And when the victim is a highly visible politician, the index of impossibility rises exponentially. When the shock of Williams' slaying has died down, the politicians who affected public displays of outrage should take a hard look at themselves. They ought to recognize their culpability in enthroning a political culture in which violence is bound to germinate and fester. And also their responsibility in saddling Nigeria with a police force that dials London or New York each time a major homicide riles the nation.

Readers' Favorites

1. Nigeria's savaged children
2. The war we ordered is here
3. What I saw in Nigeria
4. Murder Incorporated
5. No Longer at Ease
6. My Vote for Andy Uba
7. Achebe, Soyinka, and the Nigerian Mess
8. My Biafran Eyes
9. My Father's English Friend
10. A female speaker's manly vices
11. The education of Umar Yar'Adua
12. The triumph of barbarism
13. Achebe's apt censure
14. Andy Uba Goes to War (1)
15. Andy Uba Goes to War (11): What OBJ taught Uba
16. Why I Take It Personally
17. Andy Uba's highest bid
18. The folly of the Nigerian elite
19. Fraud Incorporated
20. Etiaba's father, not mine
21. Our laughing president
22. Fayose and God's response
23. My 419 Call
24. A feud of three bulls
25. More reasons to ignore Soyinka
26. Who does Obasanjo work for?

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About Okey Ndibe



Okey Ndibe is a novelist, poet, political activist from Yola, Nigeria. He is the author of *Arrows of Rain*, a critically reviewed novel published in 2000. Ndibe relocated to the United States in 1988, where he founded *African Commentary*, a magazine described as "award-winning and widely acclaimed." Ndibe is also a published poet, and a former associate professor of English at Bard College at Simon's Rock. He currently teaches fiction and African literature at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. Okey Ndibe is finishing his second novel titled *Foreign gods, incorporated*.

Speaking Engagements

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